

GOD OF OUR FATHERS

**GOD OF OUR FATHERS:
CLASSICAL THEISM FOR THE CONTEMPORARY
CHURCH**

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Front cover image taken from Benjamin West (1738–1820), *Joshua Passing the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, AU).

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“To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him?” says the Holy One.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting god,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
His understanding is unsearchable.”

—*Is. 40:25, 28*

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FOREWORD

Fred Sanders, Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University

THE CHRISTIAN doctrine of God is simply vast, and in some ways Christians can hardly be blamed for not grasping the whole theological bundle. It seems to be a teaching that, venerable as it is, exceeds our capacities, or at least the capacities of that legendary beast, the average, informed believer in an ordinary church. Professional theologians and other academics who devote years to grappling with some aspect of the doctrine of God sometimes look up from their books and wonder how their less scholarly friends are expected to keep up.

Yet surely the point of God's self-revelation is to be known. Surely one of the principal ends of the Father sending forth His eloquent Word and His articulate Spirit is to make possible, among all the redeemed and not just among a few professors, actual knowledge of God. And surely something has gone wrong when contemporary Protestants flail around, untethered from solid knowledge of the God they worship, lapsing in various ways into what Brad Littlejohn calls an idolatry problem. It must be possible to know the true God well enough to avoid worshiping a false God.

In my own teaching and preaching in service to the church, my normal approach is to teach the doctrine of God by expounding the greatness of the doctrine of the Trinity. My expectation is that the doctrine's sheer magnitude will have a tonic effect, drawing believers beyond themselves to the deep things of God. But the bigness and comprehensiveness of the doctrine of the Trinity has a downside as well. It's simply more than a mind can hold. So it occupies a place larger than the individual mind of the believer, and this fact must be reckoned with. We cannot all always be walking around with minds consciously turning over the material of the Trinitarian doctrine of God.

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Indeed, to treat the amount of understanding of Trinitarianism as the index of spiritual maturity would be to run perilously close to some kind of doctrine of salvation by understanding of theology.

On the other hand, to concede too much to the average Christian's necessary ignorance is to lapse into the notion of salvation by implicit faith, which at its extreme form Calvin mocked as "ignorance plus docility." The extremes are both insupportable, and in practical church life it seems the way forward is to occupy a principled middle position with some clearly indicated pathways for making and marking progress in knowledge. The average church member is of course neither wholly learned nor wholly ignorant, but somewhere in the middle, knowing something. To set the standard too high may be crushing; but to set it too low is infantilizing. The Protestant Reformation, with its vernacular translations, commentaries, and catechisms, had as its goal a church come of age, set free from its self-imposed immaturity. One way of grasping the Reformation's educational objective is as an intention to raise the standard of the ordinary church member, to present a more mature, more informed, more doctrinally educated and biblically literate congregation of believers.

This volume, *God of Our Fathers: Classical Theism for the Contemporary Church*, takes up that central Protestant task with a fresh vigor and a renewed determination to spread abroad the knowledge of God.

Drawing on the profound resources of Protestant thought, the authors of this book presuppose the fundamental, underlying unity of the Christian confession of the triune God; but they also presuppose certain crucial distinctions which have been too often overlooked in modern times. Among the most important of these is a distinction among four processes of growth in understanding. The conflation of these four historical-cognitive processes has led to no end of disarray in contemporary theology. The four are:

1. *Progressive revelation*, wherein God carries out a series of communicative actions to make something known more fully, bit by bit, over time, in an economy of revelation. Progressive revelation is a phenomenon within the structure of biblical theology, and can be traced between shorter arcs within the biblical history of God's economy of communication, as well as across the entire canon's unity. Progressive revelation presupposes a comprehensive unity which is capable of partial unveiling.

2. *Doctrinal development*, whereby the church, without any new revelation, unfolds its understanding of what has been revealed. Doctrinal development is frequently driven by apologetic and polemical needs. Doctrinal development has the character of deeper insight into a revealed datum, and especially into the relations among its parts, and the “good and necessary consequence” by which implications and applications can be drawn from what has been revealed. It is crucial that doctrinal development be propagated through public teaching, in plain view of the evidence and warrants being marshaled, and be subject to critical testing. While inspired insight may motivate development of doctrine, and legitimate authority may be invoked to promulgate it, neither inspiration nor authority can be the root of it.
3. *Catechetical transmission*, wherein one generation hands on to the next the content of the faith and the support systems that make that content receivable. This is tradition as it outlives one era and stretches across generations. It has the basic structure of elders teaching the younger.
4. *Personal growth*, wherein an individual learns new things, or comes to a much better grasp of them. This has the character of insight, and while it sometimes involves learning brand new things, it is primarily characterized by the new awareness of how information already inside the individual’s cognitive structure belongs together, is joined up, and is mutually implicated. Personal growth is perhaps the phase of knowledge most comfortable to moderns; in our period it is the symbol and paradigm of all learning, throwing the others in the shade.

Speaking of our contemporary situation, I would hazard the diagnosis that we tend especially to drop the ball at step three. This is a shame, because this third step is where the classical doctrine of the Trinity shines: it is preeminently a catechetical doctrine. Of course the doctrine of the Trinity can be meaningfully discussed under each of the four headings, for there is much to know and to learn about it in every way. In phase one, God’s trinity was hinted at and adumbrated throughout God’s covenant ways with His people, but was unveiled in the Father’s sending of the Son and Spirit. In

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phase two, the church reflected on their biblical monotheism in light of the undeniable identity of Jesus Christ, and labored forward to epochal moments of doctrinal development like Tertullian's "one being, three persons" language, or, more crucially, the confession of Nicaea. In phase three, the church has confessed the Trinity and handed down the doctrine about it with striking unanimity and agreement; it is a gem of orthodoxy and a hallmark of continuity in the tradition. Phase four is the illuminating moment preachers and teachers strive to evoke from maturing believers as they search the Scriptures together, and there discern the face of God as the Father, Son, and Spirit bless them, keep them, are gracious to them, and lift up the light of their countenance upon them.

All four phases are historical processes of deeper insight. But when they are not distinguished, deep confusions arise. Among evangelicals in the low church traditions, a lack of fluency with the traditional historic creeds may exacerbate the problem. A congregation that recites the ancient creed regularly has a constant reminder that there is more to the Christian faith than the handful of doctrinal points we happen to be consciously thinking about or preaching about on any given week. In a habitually creedless church life, it is easy for a Christian to get the feeling that whatever he knows right now is the extent of what is known in the church. Yet simply adding creeds to the weekly gathering of evangelicals is not an adequate solution. Conspicuously creedal congregations have more than their share of ignorant and gullible believers who cannot distinguish the Christian God from rival claimants. The threat of idolatry is widespread in the church today, and churches whose liturgies and creeds should have forewarned them are nevertheless capable of missing the point.

The New Testament treats the people of God as a people who know something, and are engaged in learning more. Paul prays that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give believers a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him (Eph 1:17). And even in delivering ethical exhortations, he admonishes them that they "did not learn Christ in this way, if they have heard him" (Eph 4:20). The health of the doctrine of God in our churches lies in this Ephesian direction of knowing, with all the saints, the length, height, breadth, and depth, of the love of God in Christ (Eph 3:18).

The Davenant Institute's motto, "*attendite ad petram unde excisi estis*," is the exhortation of Isaiah 51:1 to "look to the rock from which you were hewn." In a general sense, the Institute recognizes in these words a summons back to the sources of Protestant Christian theology. But in this volume, with its careful attention to the classical doctrine of God, its vigilance to name defections and failures in worship and confession, and its patient tracing of the way back to theological normalcy, the motto resonates with its deepest possible significance: to look to God, our rock, in whom alone is our salvation.

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Bradford Littlejohn, The Davenant Institute

“So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’”
(1 Kgs. 12:28)

“To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?” (Is. 40:18)

PROTESTANTISM’S IDOLATRY PROBLEM

PROTESTANTISM TODAY has an idolatry problem. And by that I do not mean what countless Protestant preachers on both the left and the right can be heard thundering from pulpits every Sunday—that we have embraced the idol of Mammon, or of the State, or of personal freedom, or of gluten-free dieting, etc. This may all be true enough, and yet when we seek to make the pervasive biblical warnings against idolatry relevant to the modern world in this way, we manage to miss a central strand of the Bible’s teaching on the subject: that we can make an idol of Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel.

We are accustomed to wring our hands uncomfortably about the fierce divine judgments visited on the pagan Canaanites in the Old Testament, but we cannot even bring ourselves to think about God’s sometimes equally fierce judgments on His own people not simply for worshipping the gods of the nations, but for making an idol out of the one true God. In one of the more tragicomic moments in all of Scripture, the children of Israel can be seen falling into this wickedness almost as soon as they have left Egypt, *at the very moment* when Moses is receiving the Commandments from God in fire and smoke upon the mountain. There, with the powerful and terrible

presence of Yahweh apparent to their very eyes, Aaron is able to persuade the Israelites to fashion a golden calf and worship it as the god “who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” Lest there were any room for confusion about whom this calf was meant to represent, we are told, “And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh.’”

Absurd as it may seem, this sad scene is repeated time and time again throughout Israel’s history, most crucially at the moment when the people of God divide into two, Israel and Judah. From that point onward, true worship of Yahweh is scarce in the Northern Kingdom, which is left to oscillate between, at worst, outright Baal-worship, and at best, golden calf worship, worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob under a false image. Even when the Jews finally repudiate image-worship after the Exile, they fall back into their old habits of worshipping the true God in a false guise, when the true God takes on flesh and they refuse to recognize or honor Him.

And indeed, this is the key point. We are apt to miss the lesson of the Old Testament’s many warnings against idolatry by chuckling at the benighted folly of those who needed some physical image with which to worship God. Indeed, some American evangelicals can be quite loud in their denunciation of more liturgical churches that use images or physical gestures in their services. Now is not the place to debate the merit of such denunciations. But what should be clear to us from the witness of Scripture is that what fundamentally concerns God is our tendency to worship the creature rather than the Creator—and this includes worshipping the Creator *as* a creature. The human heart is a “perpetual factory of idols,” as John Calvin observed,¹ and there are two main production lines in this factory. One starts with a creature that we are particularly enamored of because it promises to meet our deepest desires and needs, and to elevate it into an object of worship. Of the two basic modes of idolatry, this is certainly the one we are still apt to hear sermons about. The other, however, starts with the Creator, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and shudders before His holiness and incomprehensibility; needing a God that can be put on a greeting card or in a praise song, our idolatrous hearts shrink this God down to size, and make Him more like us.

Thus we find ourselves faced with phenomena like *The Shack*, in which the protagonist is consoled in his grief over his daughter’s death by a God

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:108.

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who appears in the form of an African American woman (the Father), a Middle Eastern carpenter (the Son), and an Asian woman (the Spirit). More recently, renowned spiritual writer Fr. Richard Rohr has claimed to introduce his readers to the doctrine of the Trinity as “the Divine Flow”: “whatever is going on in God is a flow, a radical relatedness, perfect communion between Three—a circle dance of love.” It is a circle dance that is not complete even within itself, for, writes Rohr, “creation is thus ‘the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity’! Once more, the divine dance isn’t a closed circle—we’re all invited!”²

It might be easy to dismiss such heterodox pop spirituality (although if we did so, we’d be dismissing the millions of evangelical readers who turned these books into runaway bestsellers), were it not that the basic ideas behind these blasphemies have long been appearing in somewhat tamer form among our academic theologians. A couple decades ago, the evangelical academy was roiled by disputes over “open theism,” which cast aside the traditional doctrines of God’s eternity and omniscience in favor of a God who lives, learns, and loves right alongside His creatures, hoping they will make good decisions and everything will turn out right in the end. Although evangelical theologians for the most part succeeded in closing ranks against open theism as just a bit too explicitly heterodox, they have been more than content to flirt with less overt denials of God’s eternity, as Steven Duby’s essay in this volume notes. At the same time, the classic attributes of divine simplicity, immutability, impassibility, and aseity have often been casually set aside if not openly rejected. In his bombshell recent book *All That is in God*, James Dolezal has identified these trends, comprising a new theology of “theistic mutualism,” as pervasive among leading Reformed and evangelical theologians and biblical commentators of the later 20th and early 21st centuries. “In an effort to portray God as more relatable,” Dolezal summarizes, “theistic mutualists insist that God is involved in a genuine give-and-take relationship with His creatures.”³

² Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2016), quoted in Fred Sanders, “Why I Don’t Flow with Richard Rohr,” *The Gospel Coalition*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/the-divine-dance/> (accessed April 12, 2018).

³ James Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 1-2.

At the same time, a radical revision of Trinitarian theology has been underway for several decades, with the fierce traditional insistence on divine unity replaced by a “social trinitarianism” in which a community of three persons—redefined as no longer the mysterious Greek *hypostases*, but in the modern English sense of individual subjects characterized by personality—either flow in and out of one another in a radical egalitarian dance (if you are socially and politically liberal) or exist in carefully-regulated structures of authority and submission (if you are socially and politically conservative). Such formulations are simply inconceivable from the standpoint of historical Christian orthodoxy, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant. Equally inconceivable is the fashionable modern talk of “the Father turning his back on the Son,” of the “Trinity being broken” at Christ’s crucifixion, language that originated in Jürgen Moltmann’s radical theological revisionism of the 1960s and 1970s and took only a couple of decades to become domesticated into conservative evangelical orthodoxy.

We could identify many causes for the current chaos—from widespread historical illiteracy, to the appearance of new philosophical challenges or at least intellectual fashions (often Kantian and Hegelian in origin), to methodological biblicism or Christocentricism. At the more popular level, though, I think that much of what drives our theological revisionism is what has always lain behind the human heart’s penchant for idolatry: a hunger for a God who is like me, a God who can relate to me, and meet me where I am, a God who is real enough to be there beside me in the midst of suffering. Whether it’s the anguished search by modern theologians for a God who could make sense out of Auschwitz or the infinitely superficial spirituality of the evangelical condolence card remembering that God will help us “mount up with wings as eagles,” the fundamental drive—emotivist and anthropocentric—is the same.

THE GOD OF THE GOSPEL

What this search for a God we can relate to forgets, however, is that the only reason that the Psalmist can cry to God in anguish for deliverance is because he knows that “Yahweh is a rock” before whom the earth reels (Ps. 18:2, 7). We all know the inspirational opening and closing verses of Isaiah 40, in which the Lord promises to comfort His people and lift them up on eagles’ wings, but how often do we ponder the resounding verses in between:

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Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord,
or what man shows him his counsel?
Whom did he consult,
and who made him understand?
Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?
Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales ...

To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him? ...

To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One....

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
(Is. 40:13-15, 18, 25, 28).

It is precisely the incomprehensibility of God that makes Him able to comprehend our every struggle and grief, the unsearchability of His understanding that enables Him to search us out and know us from our mother's womb (Ps. 139), and His infinite incapacity to suffer change or grief that gives Him an infinite capacity to carry our griefs and be our anchor through every change. Indeed, amidst all of modern theology's desire to do justice to the radical truth of the Incarnation—that the Almighty stooped to our level and died in our place—we have found at the end of it all that we have cheapened the Gospel into a generic love-story. If the Almighty was already at our level—suffering, changing, yearning, and dancing—then it should hardly surprise us that He decided to manifest Himself amongst us so as to have a closer relationship and add one more partner to His circle dance. Fallen man always wants to retell the story of His deliverance in more relatable terms—“behold your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”—but idolatry always destroys the Gospel.

Once you put it this way and take a step back to consider the landscape of modern evangelical theology, it's a frightening prospect. Amidst our fervent and often well-meant efforts to hold the line on creation against Darwinism, on justification by faith against Rome, on the atonement against

liberalism, on the sanctity of life and traditional marriage against a libertine culture of death, we have somehow allowed outright idolatry to sneak in our back door and take up residence amongst us, so that we casually tolerate blasphemy against the Lord of Hosts and have exchanged the Gospel for a mess of pottage. Of course, it is easy to minimize this danger: “Are you really accusing your evangelical brothers and sisters of heresy?” “Shouldn’t it be clear that we’re all on the same team?” “All these people sincerely love Jesus and His Word, and that’s the main thing that matters.” Of course we must distinguish false *teaching* from false *teachers*—Scripture reserves the latter harsh label for those who arrogantly and stubbornly persist in the former. And the point, in any case, is not to try to pass judgment on individuals, but simply to name such departures from Christian orthodoxy for what they are: idolatry. No doubt the prophets’ raging condemnations of Israel’s false worship seemed to many well-meaning Israelites like mad ravings—after all, how much harm could it really do to make Yahweh more accessible? Quite a lot, as the Scriptures go on to chronicle. Contemporary Protestantism today is running on fumes, on borrowed capital from an earlier era of robust orthodoxy that informed our worship and practice. We should not be so naïve as to imagine that we can continue to maintain a biblical witness on sex and marriage, or on greed and freedom, if we have ceased to preach a gospel anchored on the biblical God. “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps. 11:3)

A BLUEPRINT FOR RETRIEVAL

Still, we can hardly hope to rebuild these foundations merely by shrilly lamenting how far we have departed from them. We are Protestants, after all, and we are apt to self-identify in terms of William Chillingworth’s famous words: “The Bible, I say, the Bible only is the religion of Protestants.”⁴ Our job, we will say, is to take the Bible at its word, and let the chips fall where they may. If that entails radical revision of the doctrine of God taught by our fathers in the faith, then so be it; we will at least be following the method of the Protestant Reformers, if not the content of their faith. Of course, the cranky historical theologian will object that this is *not*, in fact, the method of the Reformers, but of the anti-metaphysical, Scripture-only Socinians whom

⁴ William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845 [1637]), 460.

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they fiercely opposed. But it will probably make little difference. This particular train is too far out of the station, and when called to account at the bar of the Reformed tradition, many contemporary theologians may be apt to say, “Well, perhaps the Socinians were onto something.”

Ultimately, the need of the hour is to show not merely that historic Protestantism is no friend to revision of the doctrine of God—although this is critical, and some of the essays in this volume make crucial contributions along these lines. Nor is it merely to show that the philosophical assumptions and concepts that underlie classical theism are eminently defensible—although again this is critical, and I hope you will find some of the essays in this volume immensely helpful in this regard as well.

Beyond this, we must show that philosophy really can be a handmaiden to theology, not a competitor, that the rigorous conceptual distinctions formulated by our forefathers actually serve to illuminate the biblical text—a text which, left entirely on its own and uninterpreted, would degenerate into self-contradiction. Consider Christ’s cry of dereliction from Ps. 22:1, so beloved of Moltmann and his many disciples in the theology of God’s own God-forsakenness. While Ps. 22:1-2 reads, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest,” vs. 24 appears to contradict it: “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.” There are four options when confronted with such a “contradiction”: (1) unequivocally side with a “strictly literal” reading of the first passage and ignore the second; (2) unequivocally side with a “strictly literal” reading of the second passage and ignore the first; (3) let the contradiction stand, without attempting to reconcile, and “live in the tension”; or (4) do the hard work (and in some cases, really not all that hard work) of interpretation. This may involve hermeneutical tools of literary analysis as well as, when applied to the cry of dereliction, the philosophical tools of systematic theology that distinguish Christ’s human experience and divine identity.⁵ Or consider the juxtaposition of Jn. 1:18—“No one has ever seen God”—with Ex. 33:11—“the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face,

⁵ I am indebted to Michael McClenahan’s sterling lecture, “The Mystery of the Gospel” (delivered at New Saint Andrews College, April 6, 2018), for a wonderful exegesis of these passages and account of the proper understanding of the cry of dereliction.

as a man speaks to his friend.” A wooden literalist might have some trouble here, but it does not take a great deal of reasoning ability to reconcile these two passages by privileging the more literal affirmation of John 1 with what we judge to be the more metaphorical affirmation of Exodus 33.⁶ This is not “refusing to take Scripture seriously,” as many modern theologians accuse classical theists of doing. Rather, it is taking Scripture very seriously, by insisting on taking it *as a whole*. When we take it as a whole, we are necessarily committed to distinguishing between statements about God that are to be taken unequivocally and thus serve a more regulative role, and statements that have a more contextually-specific meaning and require careful interpretation. It is this basic task of distinguishing, essential to all good reading, that over the course of centuries bore fruit in the Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Definition, and the elaborate formulations of the classic doctrines of the unity of God and trinity of Persons.

Not, mind you, that the purpose of these distinctions and formulations is to render God philosophically intelligible and lucid to our gaze. On the contrary, at the heart of classical theism is the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, the rhetorical question of Isaiah: “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?” It is this humble awe before the mystery of the Triune God that all idolatry fails to sustain, and that so much modern theology, with its false claims to humility before the Scriptural text, is too self-important to accept. As no less a philosopher than John Locke said, when confronted with the first wave of modernity’s redefinition of the doctrine of God, “Perhaps it would better become us to acknowledge our ignorance, than to talk such things boldly of the Holy One of Israel, and condemn others for not being as unmannerly as ourselves.”⁷

THE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME

It remains to offer a brief overview of the essays contained in this volume, and how each contributes to the larger task I have here outlined.

At the risk of frightening away casual readers, the volume begins with by far the longest and most historically detailed essay, E.J. Hutchinson’s

⁶ I am indebted to Fred Sanders for this particular example.

⁷ John Locke, *Remarks Upon Some of Mr. Norris’s Books, Wherein He Asserts P. Malebranche’s Opinion, of Our Seeing All Things in God*, in J.A. St. John, ed., *The Philosophical Works of John Locke* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1894), II:469.

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“Melanchthon’s Unintended Reformation? The Case of the Missing Doctrine of God.” But do not be scared off. The mystery case that Hutchinson sets out to solve is one of the greatest importance for understanding our Protestant tradition, and one could hardly ask for a livelier guide in the investigation than him. Hutchinson begins with the great 19th-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who in many ways stands at the headwaters of the great revision of modern theology in an anthropocentric direction, and considers his claim that to be a true and full reformation, the Protestant Reformation must involve a reformation of the doctrine of God—as well as doctrines like ecclesiology and soteriology. Inasmuch as the Reformers failed to comprehensively undertake this critical project, Schleiermacher aimed to bring their reformation to completion. At first glance, shows Hutchinson, it might seem that Luther’s great colleague, Philipp Melanchthon himself, had intended such a revision, rejecting the sterile scholastic doctrine of God in favor of a more dynamic redemptive God. However, he goes on to show through close engagement with Melanchthon’s work that this is a misreading of the reformer—*sterile* scholasticism that leads men to speculation rather than to salvation is indeed rejected, but for Melanchthon this never meant reworking the basic formulations of creedal orthodoxy; on the contrary, philosophical distinctions still had an appropriate place in securing the mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation. This essay thus offers something of a programmatic sketch of a properly Protestant approach to the doctrine of God: one that eschews needless speculation and hews closely to the saving narrative of Scripture, but without despising the catholic inheritance of rigorous reflection on the identity and attributes of the God who saves us.

The second essay in the volume, David Haines’s “Natural Theology and Protestant Orthodoxy,” builds upon this foundation by showing that for Protestants historically, there has been a symbiotic, rather than competitive, relationship between biblical and philosophical reasoning about God. At the intersection of this symbiotic relationship was the crucial discipline of “natural theology,” which clarified what God revealed about Himself through creation and conscience, prior to His more direct self-revelation in Scripture. Indeed, Haines goes beyond showing that there is ample warrant in the Christian tradition for natural theology, so much despised today; rather, a commitment to natural theology is itself part of the core of doctrines that constitute historic Christian orthodoxy, and is necessary for helping sustain

other doctrines recognized as part of orthodoxy. A *purely* biblical theology, historic Protestant teaching recognized, was likely to become a heterodox theology.

Since contemporary Protestant readers may be understandably suspicious of this bold claim, the next two essays in the book tackle two issues where recent theology has frequently posited a sharp opposition between the biblical testimony and the categories of classical theism, said to be derived from Greek philosophy rather than Scripture. In “Divine Action and the Meaning of Eternity,” Steven Duby engages the very difficult question of divine eternity—how can a timeless and transcendent God engage in history in the way that He is constantly said to do in Scripture? The problem, Duby shows, is not one of how to reconcile Scripture with extra-biblical philosophy, but of how to make sense of the full testimony of Scripture itself. The God of the Bible is one who both transcends and acts in time. How are we to understand this? Duby suggests that rather than casually caricaturing the earlier scholastic tradition, we seek to read it carefully and retrieve its insights. If we do so, we may find that they are far more nuanced and fruitful than we could have imagined.

Alastair Roberts’s consideration of recent debates on the eternal subordination of the Son, “‘Arid Scholars’ vs. The Bible? A Theological and Exegetical Critique of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” poses the problem of the supposed opposition of Scripture and scholasticism in even sharper terms. Surveying the unhealthy opposition between biblical and systematic theology that prevailed through much of that recent debate on the nature of the Trinity, Roberts points us back to a symbiotic rather than competitive relationship between the two. Roberts then applies this relationship to the case study of the subordination of the Son, effectively showing how scholastic categories, developed in conversation with the biblical text, can shed light back upon the text in a way that enables us to rightly understand Christ’s saving work.

Gayle Doornbos’s essay, “Can the Trinity Save Everything? Herman Bavinck, Missional Theology, and the Dogmatic Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” brings us back to historical theology, but at its point of intersection with contemporary theology. Noting how the doctrine of the Trinity has been abused in contemporary missiology in a way that collapses the Creator/creature distinction and brings God down to our level, Doornbos asks what the proper “use” of the doctrine of the Trinity is. Is it

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merely, as critics of classical theism charge, a self-inclosed and sterile mystery that fails to shape the rest of our theology, or does it help us make sense of the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption, as well as the church's mission? The great Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, argues Doornbos, offers us a sterling example of how to answer this question responsibly; Bavinck does argue for "cosmological" and "soteriological" dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity in addition to its "ontological" dimension, but by carefully parsing the distinctions and relationships between these dimensions, Bavinck helps us avoid many pitfalls of recent Missional Theology.

One of the greatest contemporary systematic theologians, responsible perhaps more than anyone else for putting the classical doctrine of God back on the agenda of modern theology, is John Webster. This essay collection would thus hardly be complete without a consideration of what we can learn from Webster's methodological prioritization of the doctrine of God. This Timothy Harmon undertakes in his essay, "Biblical Inspiration and the Doctrine of God, with Attention to the Example of John Webster." Here again we find that classical theism is not a sterile doctrine, but a richly generative one. Harmon surveys the seemingly overworked terrain of the doctrine of Scriptural inspiration and argues that we can gain a much richer understanding of Scripture itself if, instead of taking for granted the idea of "God" and asking what we mean by His "Word," we pause to consider how close reflection on the nature of God Himself can enrich our understanding of what Scripture is and does.

Lest the reader come away from this book with the notion that "older is always better," and that there is nothing to be done for modern theology but to leap back into the arms of the older Reformed masters, the final two essays explore ways in which our contemporary moment should compel a reconsideration of our approach to the doctrine of God. In "Encounter With the Triune God in the Reformed Liturgy for the Lord's Supper: Eucharistic Prayer or Communion Order?" Christopher Dorn argues that the richness of historic Reformed theology has not always been matched by its communion liturgies. These have often been insufficiently Trinitarian in their shape, and the reforms of the modern liturgical movement, he argues, can in fact help us more faithfully reflect the catholic doctrine of the Trinity in our worship.

Finally, Joseph Minich's concluding essay, "Classical Theism in a World Come of Age," boldly proposes that rather than taking the "disenchantment" of the contemporary world as cause for lament, we should embrace it as an opportunity. The absence of God so keenly experienced by faithful believer as well as stubborn atheist under the conditions of modernity, he contends, is an invitation to a fuller consideration of what divine transcendence means. The biblical and classical Christian doctrine of God, Minich argues, is not best attested by the sense of an enchanted creation order in which God presents Himself in every flower or sunset, but by the concept of history itself, the experience of radical contingency somehow secured within a purposive order being guided to its fulfillment. Accepting our place within this history, rather than yearning nostalgically for an era in which belief in God was "easier," is essential if we are to again come face-to-face with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and reveal Him again to our contemporaries as the desire of the nations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I close this introduction, it bears emphasizing that no project of retrieval and reformation can happen through books alone. Indeed, the essays here presented to the world are almost an afterthought rather than the main show. That happens each summer (and with increasing frequency throughout the year in smaller gatherings) at the Convivium Irenicum which played host to these papers. Theology, I have become increasingly convinced, is an enterprise that depends at every point on friendship; and the renewal of the church today, and the renewal of our teaching on the Triune God, cannot happen without the cultivation of bonds of deep friendship, trust, and collaboration between all those who love the faith once delivered to the saints and hope to keep handing it on. The bonds of friendship formed and nurtured at last year's Convivium Irenicum (in both its East and West gatherings) will, I am confident, long outlast the shelf life of this book, and accomplish far more for the church. I thus want to recognize the contributions of others who presented papers or helped lead panel discussions at the 2017 Convivium—Fred Sanders, Paul Nedelisky, Joel Carini, Ben Miller, Jake Meador, Steven Wedgeworth, and Peter Escalante—as well as all those who attended and contributed by their vigorous discussion and thoughtful questions.

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As always, we are profoundly grateful to those who undertook the labor of revising and polishing their papers for publication in this volume, rather than taking them, as in many cases they could have, to a more prestigious academic journal. Finally, we appreciate the tireless labors of Sarah Belschner, Dan Kemp, Brian Marr, and Josiah Roberts in helping to prepare this manuscript for publication.

III: DIVINE ACTION AND THE MEANING OF ETERNITY

Steven J. Duby, Grand Canyon University

I. INTRODUCTION

IN CONTEMPORARY theology, the topic of divine eternity is hotly debated. All orthodox Christians confess that God is without beginning and without end, but, according to some authors, a biblical view of creation and divine action in time requires us to affirm that God is not “timeless” but rather “temporal,” experiencing succession in His existence and activity. This essay will first briefly recount relevant biblical teaching on creation and God’s providence and canvas how some recent writers have concluded from their reading of Scripture that God must be “temporal.” Then I will make a case that the Christian theological tradition possesses resources that will help us account for the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and divine providence without suggesting that God is temporal or undergoes succession in His life.

II. CREATION, DIVINE ACTION, AND DIVINE ETERNITY

The psalmist declares, “From everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps. 90:2). It is not uncommon to hear biblical commentators emphasize that such a statement does not necessarily entail that God is “timeless” or “outside time.”¹ The scriptural doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and providence in particular are sometimes taken to imply that God is “temporal” or “in time” as He acts and interacts with His creatures in history. Unlike some other

¹ For example, see the comments on God’s eternity in John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume Two: Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 32–34.

ancient accounts of the universe, Scripture teaches that the universe is not infinitely old. The history of the world extends back only to the point at which the triune God spoke the universe into being (e.g., Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6, 9; 148:5; Jn. 1:1; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3). In light of this, some recent theologians have argued that God must exist in some sort of time prior to the beginning of creation in order to uphold that God brought the world into being at a particular time in the past and that God was free in choosing to do so. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, argues that God’s decision to create the world led to him existing in a certain kind of time (“God’s time for creation”) even prior to the beginning of the world. For without a pre-existing timeline on which to place the beginning of creation, creation would have been co-eternal with God and would have appeared to be a necessary counterpart to God.² T. F. Torrance emphasizes that “God is always Father, not always Creator.” To elaborate, “While God was always Father and was Father independently of what he has created, as Creator he acted in a way that he had not done before, in bringing about absolutely new events—this means that the creation of the world out of nothing is something new even for God. God was always Father, but he *became* Creator.” Hence God is “absolutely free to do what he had never done before, and free to be other than he was eternally.” Therefore, “there is, if we may express it thus, a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in God’s activity, which calls for a consideration of the unique nature of ‘time’ in the eternal Life of God.” “God’s kind of time” is “marked by distinct moments in it such as that before and after creation.”³

Scripture also speaks often of God acting in history and interacting with His creatures. For example, He speaks to Abraham and Moses at particular times and is even willing to engage them in dialogue (Gen. 18:17-33; Exod. 32:7-35). He is always with His people, leading them by a pillar of cloud and fire in their flight from Egypt (Exod. 13:17-22). We could multiply examples, but the point is that God acts and interacts at diverse times and brings about diverse effects, which has led some to conclude that God cannot be “atemporal.” Garrett DeWeese observes that a “ubiquitous complaint against the atemporal view is that it cannot make sense of God’s causal

² Jürgen Moltmann, *God and Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 83–86, 116–17.

³ T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 207–209, 241.

activity in the actual temporal order, if time is dynamic.”⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff insists that because God “has a history of acting and responding” He is a “being among whose states there is temporal succession.”⁵ If God is an agent—“not an impassive factor in reality”—then He is a God who changes and has a “felt temporality in [his] experience.”⁶

Similarly, Alan Padgett makes a case that though God is not in our physical, “measured” time, He is “temporal” in that He “really changes in relationship with the world.” Padgett writes, “The occurrence of an effect (which is itself a change) implies a change in the cause of the effect.” God could timelessly will that different effects take place at different times, but God’s “power-to-act” could not be timeless and still produce effects at different times. Since God is not “absolutely timeless,” “the traditional doctrine of eternity must be abandoned.”⁷ Padgett’s mention of the “traditional doctrine of eternity” is significant because it expresses a common belief that traditional authors like Augustine, Anselm, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas believed that God was “absolutely timeless.” In a moment we will examine whether such theologians’ statements about God’s eternity imply that God is unable to produce diverse effects at diverse times. We will also explore how resources within the catholic theological tradition can help us to affirm that God created the world *ex nihilo* and acts in the world to produce different effects at different times, without implying that God is “temporal.” Before we do that, however, we ought to consider why readers of Scripture would be interested in the first place in holding that God is without succession and not “temporal.”

⁴ Garrett J. DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 159. For summaries of the different theories of the nature of time, see, e.g., William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), chs. 4–5; R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 2. Without delving into the technical language on time, I should clarify that I assume in this article that only the present moment truly exists (not the past or the future) and that this view was held by traditional Christian authors like Augustine, Boethius and others.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays, Volume I*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133–34, 150, 153; “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in *Inquiring about God*, 157, 173, 178.

⁶ Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 145, 153–55; “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” 158, 160–2.

⁷ Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 60, 62–66, 122, 130–31, 146.

III. DIVINE ETERNITY AND DIVINE ACTION IN SCRIPTURE

To anticipate some of the material to be discussed below, Boethius' definition of eternity has become a classic formulation in the Christian doctrine of God: "the whole, simultaneous and perfection possession of interminable life."⁸ With its talk of God possessing His life as a whole and all at once, such a view of divine eternity rules out the claim that God undergoes succession in His existence and activity and is "temporal" in that sense. The burden of this section is to indicate why scriptural teaching would compel Boethius (and us) to think of God's eternity in that manner.

Here it is possible to offer only a brief account of relevant biblical teaching, and this section will focus on the Bible's description of the fullness of God's life and His way of acting both in Himself and toward us. The God of Scripture is the source of all that is good and satisfying in creation. David proclaims this when He and the Israelites give their treasures for the building of the temple to be completed by Solomon. David says that "the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty" belong to the LORD, for the heavens and the earth belong to Him. Wealth and glory come from the LORD, for He rules all things. The abundant offerings of David and the people are ultimately not their own, for everything is from the LORD's hand (1 Chron. 29:11-16). Many of the psalms also speak of God's plenitude and generosity: the sons of men find refuge in Him and feast and drink from His abundance, for with Him is the fountain of life (Ps. 36:7-9). Among the LORD's mighty works are His provision of the earth's waters for His creatures and His special supply of sustenance and gladness to human beings (Ps. 104:5-18). When God opens His hand with good gifts, creatures are satisfied, and when God sends forth His creative Spirit, the face of the earth is renewed (Ps. 104:27-30). Generation after generation therefore celebrates God's rich goodness (Ps. 145:7). God can thus tell His people in their hypocrisy that He has no need of their sacrifices: "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it" (Ps. 50:12).

The Gospel of John calls attention to the fact that it is not because of an outward relationship to creatures that God possesses fullness of life. Rather, God enjoys that fullness spontaneously and in Himself, even without

⁸ Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, in *The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. S.J. Tester (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), V.6, 422–23.

reference to creatures. From this prevenient richness God gives physical and spiritual life to creatures (Jn. 1:1-5; 5:24-26; 11:25-26; 17:5). In His plenitude God is active in both creation and redemption. He is not served by human hands as though needing something but instead is the one who bestows life, breath and all good things upon His creatures (Acts 17:24-25; cf. Rom. 11:35-36). By His might God accomplished the resurrection and heavenly exaltation of Christ, a surpassingly great power also operative toward believers now as Christ, who “fills all in all,” shares His “fullness” with the church (Eph. 1:19-23). By that “fullness” Christ rose from the dead and is the firstborn of the new creation, and in view of that fullness dwelling bodily in Christ the church must not look elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment (Col. 1:19; 2:9). God is thus called the “blessed God,” for He enjoys in Himself all that is good and requisite to happiness and contentment (1 Tim. 1:11; 6:15). Having fullness of life in and of Himself, God is God “from everlasting to everlasting,” the one for whom a thousand years are like a single day (Ps. 90:2, 4), which signals that God is not only without beginning and without end but also relates to the passage of time in a manner radically different from creatures. It is not just that the LORD’s years have no end but also that He, unlike the passing created order, remains “the same” (Ps. 102:25-27). As Thomas Aquinas describes it, God is called the “Ancient of Days” (Dan. 7:9-22) because He is prior to all times, but, though He is “old” as one who always exists, He is “youthful” as one who suffers no deficiency or fading into the past, “remaining immovable in himself.”⁹

Furthermore, according to Scripture, the God of Israel is not idle: “he who keeps Israel does not slumber or sleep” (Ps. 121:4). The Father is always sustaining the world through His Son and always working to accomplish His plan of salvation through His Son (Jn. 5:17; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). His word is living and “energetic,” piercing and judging the human heart (Heb. 4:12). Of course, there are biblical texts that call God to action. The psalmist asks, for example, “Why do you sleep, Lord” (Ps. 44:23)? Yet the book of Habakkuk teaches us that human ignorance of God’s working is no reason to deny that He is at work. Habakkuk asks the LORD how long he must cry out to Him about the violence surrounding him. Why does the LORD “look idly” upon wrongdoing? But the LORD responds that, even though it may not appear

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, ed. Ceslari Pera (Rome-Turin: Marietti, 1950), X.2.860 and 864, 324.

to be so, He is in fact working, doing something among the nations that Habakkuk could hardly have imagined (Hab. 1:2-5, 13).

Moreover, God is eternally active in His own triune being. The Father eternally gives life and glory to the Son and loves the Son, while the Son proceeds from the Father and lives in eternal fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit—the “eternal Spirit, who is not just sent economically but “proceeds from” the Father and the Son eternally (Prov. 8:22-31; Jn. 1:1; 5:26; 7:29; 15:26; 16:14-15; 17:5, 24; Heb. 9:14). While various authors in the Christian tradition have (justifiably, in my estimation) gleaned from general revelation that God is “pure act” (never inactive or having any unrealized potential in Himself) the doctrine of the Trinity secures this claim in a powerful way. It clarifies that God’s knowing, willing, and loving are eternally fulfilled in the triune processions, problematizing any claim that God would exist in idleness and need to transition to actuality in creating the world or acting in it. Since this triune God is already in act in perfect love before the foundation of the world, He accomplishes His works without exertion or labor. God simply commands, for example, that the entire universe should come into being *ex nihilo* (Ps. 33:6-9; 148:5; Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3). In the work of regeneration too the word of God is efficacious without exertion, for the Son by His mere voice raises the dead (Jn. 5:25).

This fullness and actuality of God attested in Scripture ultimately stands behind Boethius’ definition of divine eternity and ought to make us pause before asserting that God’s life involves a succession of moments (or is that sense “temporal”). Still, it is important to consider whether the traditional authors operating with something like a Boethian definition of eternity can do justice to the Bible’s teaching of creation *ex nihilo* and its insistence on God’s presence and action in time. In order to explore that question, we will next look at some material in the works of Augustine, Boethius, Anselm and Thomas.

IV. DIVINE ETERNITY AND DIVINE ACTION IN SOME TRADITIONAL AUTHORS

In Augustine’s musings on divine eternity, he can say, on the one hand, that God is “above all times” and that God’s knowing, willing, seeing, moving,

speaking, and resting do not occur “temporally.”¹⁰ Yet Augustine clearly believes that God is present with creatures in time and that God acts in time. He can trace the providential hand of God in his pre-conversion experience, for example, discerning God working through human teachers who shaped his youth.¹¹ He can similarly recognize that God worked through human authors to produce the Scriptures.¹² Not all of God’s effects themselves are simultaneous and eternal. For example, the speech of God the Father at the baptism of Jesus (“This is my beloved Son...”) is determined by God’s eternal will but “made temporal,” thus having a distinct beginning and end in time.¹³ In short, for Augustine, God is both “immutable” and actively “changing” and “renewing” all things.¹⁴

Along with offering his aforementioned definition of eternity, Boethius claims that God “presides” over created life so that no one is outside His care. Indeed, God “keeps together” the “diversity of natures” in the world; the “order” and “motions” of nature would not “continue” or “unfold” without “one remaining who would himself arrange these varieties of changes.”¹⁵ God is like an artificer who conceives in His mind the form of what He wishes to make and then effects His work over time (“through temporal orders”), administering His plan by the God-ordained dispositions of created things in the world.¹⁶ Significantly, in his work *De Trinitate*, Boethius characterizes eternity as an attribute rooted not in any feature of God in Himself but in His relationship toward external things. Just as ubiquity is not predicated of God because it references a “thing” in God but because every place is present to God, so eternity is predicated of God because He is present in every time (past, present, future).¹⁷ For Boethius, the key point is not that God is strictly speaking “outside” time—indeed, He

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessionum Libri XIII*, 2nd ed., ed. L. Verheijen, CCSL 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), XI.1.1, 194; XII.11.13, 222; XII.15.18, 224–25; XIII.29.44, 268; XIII.37.52, 272.

¹¹ Augustine, *Conf.*, I.12.19, 10–11.

¹² Augustine, *Conf.*, XIII.15.16, 250–51.

¹³ Augustine, *Conf.*, XI.6.8–8.10, 198–99.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Conf.*, I.4.4, 2.

¹⁵ Boethius, *Phil. Consol.*, I.6, 166–67; III.12, 298–301. The English translations of Boethius are the author’s but reflect to some extent those given in the Loeb edition.

¹⁶ Boethius, *Phil. Consol.*, IV.6, 358–61.

¹⁷ Boethius, *De Trinitate*, in *Theological Tractates, Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, 20–23.

quite evidently works within it—but rather that God’s perfect life is neither lost nor acquired by Him through temporal change.¹⁸

In the *Monologion*, Anselm declares that it is “repugnant” that the highest, creative essence should exist “nowhere and never.” For this nature exists most truly and supremely, and, indeed, anything that exists anywhere or at any time would not exist without its sustaining presence.¹⁹ God is genuinely present in time, albeit in a unique manner. The highest essence is said to be “in time,” but when such language is applied to both God and “local and temporal natures,” the meaning is diverse. To say something is “in time” normally signifies that it is (1) present in those times in which it is said to be and (2) contained by those times. Both aspects of the meaning are applicable to the existence of creatures, but only the first is applicable in God’s case. In this connection, according to Anselm, it may be helpful to say that God is “with time” more than “in time.” However, God is still certainly in time “in his own way,” namely, in sustaining all finite, mutable, temporal things so that they do not come to nothing. Thus, in Anselm’s view, God is “absent to none.”²⁰ To say that God is eternal is therefore not to try to remove Him or His activity from the temporal world; it is, rather, to underscore God’s infinite, perfect, unchanging life. Given the simplicity of God, His eternity is just His essence considered with respect to the temporal mode of fleeting creaturely existence.²¹

The coherence of these authors’ claims that God both transcends temporal succession and is present and active in time can be illumined by Thomas’ discussion of eternity in conjunction with the concept of motion. For Thomas, God transcends temporal succession precisely because He does not undergo motion, which is what is measured by time.²² God is eternal in that He enjoys “wholeness” of life in contrast to creatures, whose existence

¹⁸ Cf. *Phil. Consol.*, V.6, 422–25.

¹⁹ Anselm, *Monologion*, in vol. 1 of *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946), XX, 35.

²⁰ Anselm, *Monologion*, XXII, 40–41.

²¹ Anselm, *Monologion*, XXIV, 42.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaria in Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, in vol. 2 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1884), III.3.5.15, 114 (hereafter *In Phys.*); *Summa contra Gentiles*, in vol. 13 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: Typis Riccardi Garroni, 1918), I.15, 41–42 (hereafter *SCG*).

is marked by motion and succession.²³ What is meant by “motion” when Thomas says that God does not experience it as creatures do? It should be noted, first, that there is a qualified sense in which motion can be predicated of God, namely, in that God knows and wills and operates toward creatures to bring them into being, to conserve their being and to give them diverse gifts.²⁴ Yet, following Aristotle, Thomas understands motion more strictly to be the “act of one existing in potency.” In other words, for Thomas as for Aristotle, motion is not the actuality of something that is perfectly in act but rather the “imperfect act” of something that is no longer wholly idle and is increasing in actuality (like a physical object heating up to a higher temperature).²⁵ In addition, in a broader sense motion can be predicated of an acting subject whose operation (knowing, willing, causing something to happen outwardly in the world) involves a transition from inactive potency or idleness to act.²⁶ Because Thomas believes that God is pure act with no potency yet to be fulfilled, he rejects the notion that God’s operation would be characterized by such reduction of potency to act and would deny that God “moves” in this sense, which entails, in his theological framework, that God’s life and actuality are eternal rather than temporal.²⁷ Yet, God is still

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Pars Prima*, in vol. 4 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1888), Ia.10.2 corp. and ad 3, 96; 10.3 corp., 97–98 (hereafter *ST*).

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum*, 2 vols., ed. R.P. Mandonnet (Paris, 1929), I.8.3.1 ad 1 and 2, 211–12 (hereafter *Sent.*); *De Div. Nom.*, IX.4.840–41, 316; *ST*, Ia.9.1 ad 1 and 2, 90; 18.3 ad 1, 228.

²⁵ Thomas, *In Phys.*, III.1.2.3, 6–7, 105, 106; 1.3.2, 107–108; III.2.4.1, 109; cf. 1.3.6, 108; 3.5.17, 115; *Sent.*, I.8.3.1 sol., 211; *SCG*, I.13, 31.

²⁶ Thomas, *Sent.*, I.8.3.1 ad 4, 212; II.1.1.5 ad 11, 37; *Sententia Libri De Anima*, in vol. 45/1 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina; Paris: J. Vrin, 1984), III.6, 229; *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.369, 121; *SCG*, I.13, 30–34; 68, 198–99; II.33, 348; *ST*, Ia.18.3 corp., 228; *ST, Pars Secunda*, in vol. 6 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1891), IaIIae.9.1 and 3, 74–75, 77–78.

²⁷ Thomas identifies God’s action as God’s own essence, with a relation to the creature (*Sent.*, I.2.1.2 ad 2, 63; *De Potentia*, in vol. 2 of *Quaestiones Disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. (Rome-Turin: Marietti, 1965), I.1 ad 1, 9; III.3 corp., 43; *SCG*, II.8–9, 283–84; 35, 348; *ST*, Ia.25.1 ad 2, 290; 45.3 ad 1, 467). This distinguishes God’s action from even that of “aeiternal” creatures like angels, who, though unchanging in their being, can change with regard to understanding, affections, and place and whose operation is not identical with essence (so *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, in vol. 24/2 of *Opera Omnia* (Rome: Commissio Leonina; Paris: Éditions Du Cerf, 2000), 11 corp.; *ST*, Ia.10.5, 100–1).

present and active in the field of temporal reality. Thomas insists that God acts in all things—indeed, “immediately” in all things—in conserving their existence. God is actively present “as long as a thing has being.”²⁸ Divine eternity, then, does not exclude time but rather in this sense “includes all times.”²⁹

But if God’s actuality never changes or increases when He chooses to effect something new in the world, what would explain the fact that God’s effects occur at different times and places? While I think it is unwise to assume that finite creatures can fully understand this matter, I would suggest that some statements from Reformed orthodox theologians can shed light here. In particular, their talk of the “egression” (breaking forth) or “termination” of God’s actuality is helpful.³⁰ On the one hand, there is the actuality of God itself, which is just God’s own essence in its pure activity (with no unrealized potential yet to be brought forth). On the other hand, there is the “egression” or breaking forth of that actuality to bring about different effects at different times.³¹ In that egression God is not transitioning from idleness to activity but is rather just applying or directing His essential actuality to the accomplishment of some outward work (e.g., creation, blessing, judgment, regeneration). On the one hand, then, God transcends time and is not determined or measured by it in that His actuality does not fluctuate. Indeed, the actuality by which He accomplishes His outward works is the same as that of His own essence, whereas in creatures outward actions require a newly prompted actuality added to the activity of our mere act of existing. On the other hand, God is present and active with and in time in

²⁸ Thomas, *ST*, Ia.8.1 corp. and ad 1, 82; cf. 8.3 ad 1, 87. Thomas comments that things are never distant from God spatially (or, we might add, temporally), but only by “dissimilitude of nature and grace, as he himself is above all things by the excellence of his own nature” (8.1 ad 3, 82).

²⁹ Thomas, *ST*, Ia.10.2 ad 4, 96. Put differently, God’s eternity is indivisibly “outside” the continuum of temporal duration and yet precisely by virtue of this also “coexists” with each point on the continuum (*SCG*, I.67, 185).

³⁰ For more on this, see Steven J. Duby, “Divine Immutability, Divine Action and the God-world Relation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 (2017), 144–62.

³¹ See Johann Alsted, *Theologia Naturalis* (Antonius Hummius, 1615), I.16, 140, 147–51; Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum* (Utrecht, 1648), I.13, 233; Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, vol. 1 (Geneva, 1688), III.10.15, 225.; V.3.16, 484–85; John Owen, *A Dissertation on Divine Justice*, in vol. 10 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), I.1, 498–500.

IV:
“ARID SCHOLARS” VS. THE BIBLE?
A THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL CRITIQUE OF THE
ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON

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TRINITY, GENDER, AND CONTROVERSY

THE DOCTRINE of the eternal subordination of the Son has been a cause of considerable controversy in evangelical circles in recent years. Snarled up in the gender debates and fractious evangelical politics, it has excited a complicated sort of outrage, driven both by the high stakes theological concerns of the Church’s historic doctrine of God and by the personal, institutional, and factional antagonisms of the American evangelical subculture. The conjoining of these motivations in disputes regarding the position have regrettably made discerning the difference between doctrinal principle and opportunistic theological recriminations or reactive partisanship difficult for many. This essay is, in part, an attempt to bring some clarity to the issues that are at stake.

Beyond the theological matters directly involved within them, however, controversies surrounding the eternal subordination of the Son have revealed fault lines and tensions between theological disciplines, along with the challenge of practically reconciling a Protestant emphasis upon the authority of Scripture with a commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy. Within this essay, I take disputes surrounding the eternal subordination of the Son as an occasion for considering the proper relationship between dogmatic or systematic theology and biblical theology more broadly and consider a possible means for addressing the tensions between them.

The doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son, also known as “eternal relational authority-submission,” upholds the claim that, in all eternity, the Son submits to the authority of the Father, that the life of the Trinity is characterized by relations of authority and submission.¹ In recent years, the position has perhaps been most prominently represented by Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware. Writing in a book defending the doctrine, Bruce Ware describes it as follows:

This view holds that God reveals himself in Scripture as one God in three persons, such that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are fully equal in their deity as each possesses fully and eternally the one and undivided divine nature; yet the Father is revealed as having the highest authority among the Trinitarian persons, such that the Son, as agent of the Father, eternally implements the will of the Father and is under the Father’s authority, and the Holy Spirit likewise serves to advance the Father’s purposes fulfilled through the Son, under the authority of the Father and also of the Son.²

While such claims have provoked considerable criticism among theologians concerned with the doctrine of the Trinity, the ferocity of recent controversies probably owes much more to the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity has become a field upon which arguments about gender have played out. In an argument that rests in part upon an analogy between the submission of the Son to the Father in the natural equality of the Godhead and the submission of wives to husbands in the natural equality of their common humanity and in part upon the exegesis of verses such as 1 Corinthians 11:3, the eternal subordination of the Son supposedly provides support or even a foundation for the submission of women to men in marriage. Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli observe:

Behind the Trinity debate, complementarians and egalitarians clash about the roles of men and women in the

¹ Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 237.

² Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?” 237–38.

church and the home. What started as an exegetical debate over biblical texts about the relationship between men and women has turned into a theological and philosophical debate about the inner life of the eternal Trinity.³

The theological doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son has thereby come to represent a brand of complementarianism, and to function as a lightning rod for all the opposition to it.⁴

A MENAGERIE OF SOCIAL TRINITARIANISMS

It should be recognized that, in using the doctrine of the Trinity as the foundation for a theory of society or the Church, complementarian supporters of the eternal submission of the Son are in large company; debates often revolve around *which* vision of society the Trinity underwrites, not *whether* it ought to function in such a manner. Through the influence of social Trinitarians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, John Zizioulas, and Leonardo Boff the doctrine of the Trinity has come to be seen by many as paradigmatic for human society.⁵

As the doctrine of the Trinity has been used to underwrite every ecclesiology or form of society or polity from the primacy of the episcopal office (John Zizioulas), to a feminist vision of openness, equality, and mutuality in relationship,⁶ to a free church ecclesiology (Volf), to the submission of women to their husbands in marriage, a certain scepticism concerning the actual usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity for illumining social theory would seem to be in order. Stephen Holmes wryly remarks:

³ Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli, "An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity," in *One God in Three Persons*, 196.

⁴ Perhaps not entirely fairly, as it is neither the official position of the organization nor a matter on which there exists a consensus among its members, the eternal subordination of the Son is widely associated with the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW).

⁵ See, for instance, Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program?: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 405.

⁶ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 127; Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 93.

Volf proclaims his loyalty to Zizioulas’s Trinitarian programme, yet by a seemingly minor technical variation, he effectively completely inverts all the ecclesiological implications of it, generating a radically different vision of the life of the church. It might be that this is the reality, that the difference (transposing the argument into the political realm) between democracy and fascism (say) is determined by the most abstruse of theological differences, but this feels to me uncomfortable; I would rather believe that the error of fascism is demonstrable on the basis of fundamental positions in anthropology, and does not rely on subtle distinctions in theology proper.⁷

Attempts to ground our vision of society upon our doctrine of the Trinity depend upon the analogy between the personhood of the Triune persons and human personhood, upon the assumption that “the triune persons are very like us, in their personhood at least, so their perfect relations might be a model for our attempts to imagine what well-lived relationships might look like.”⁸ More troubling, this analogy allows for traffic in both directions. As Holmes observes, both Volf and Boff airbrush the inconvenient asymmetry of divine *taxis*—something which Zizioulas accents—in their doctrine of the Trinity, as it disrupts the egalitarian picture that they desire.⁹

A DOCTRINE OF QUESTIONABLE PEDIGREE

Although theological discourse in the context of contemporary social media is far more flammable and explosive than that which occurs in more traditional media, recent controversies about this doctrine are merely the latest iteration of controversies surrounding the doctrine of the eternal

⁷ Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 28.

⁸ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 29.

⁹ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 28. The same concern has led Millard Erickson to resist eternal generation and historic understandings of divine *taxis*, in order to emphasize a radical symmetry in the divine life. *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 251; *God In Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 310.

generation of the Son that have been constantly rumbling away and intermittently erupting for several years now. Several books have been written on various sides of these debates, defending, attacking, theologically articulating, and qualifying the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son.

The egalitarian theologian, Kevin Giles, one of the loudest critics of the doctrine, recently published his fourth book in which he addresses this matter in detail.¹⁰ In 2009, Millard J. Erickson wrote *Who's Tampering With the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate*. In defence of the doctrine, Bruce Ware and John Starke edited *One God in Three Person, Implications for Life* (2015), within which a variety of species of eternal subordination arguments are articulated and defended. More recently, the late Mike Ovey's book *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* also defended the eternal subordination position.¹¹

Grudem has insisted upon the historical pedigree of the doctrine, appealing to figures such as Augustine, John Calvin, B.B. Warfield, Augustus Strong, and Louis Berkhof.¹² In what might be one of the most important pieces of evidence for Grudem's claims, Strong uses the relation between man and woman to illustrate the more general point that order doesn't require inequality in the context of his treatment of the Trinity:

The subordination of the person of the Son to the person of the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority. The possibility of an order, which yet involves no inequality, may be illustrated by the relation between man and woman. In office man is first and woman is second, but woman's soul is worth as much as man's; see *1 Cor 11:3*—"the head of every man is Christ; and

¹⁰ Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002) *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

¹¹ Mike Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (Oxford: Latimer Trust, 2016).

¹² Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 415ff.

the head of the woman is the man: and the head of Christ is God.”¹³

It is noteworthy that the passages of various theologians that Grudem appeals to are almost without exception speaking either of the Son’s being begotten of the Father or of “subordination” in reference to divine *taxis*, both truths concerning the order of the persons of the Trinity and their relations. The Father is the first, the Son the second, and the Spirit the third person of the Trinity, the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son, and divine action is from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. Although theologians may increasingly recognize the infelicity of the term “subordination” and seek to avoid it, precisely on account of its vulnerability to misreadings such as Grudem’s, some form of “subordination” has always been a feature of Trinitarian theology. The problems arise when an orthodox “subordination” of divine *taxis* is reimagined as relations of authority and submission between the persons of the Trinity, considered as highly analogous with the relation between husband and wife. With reference to the Trinity, “subordination,” in the orthodox sense of the term, is most definitely not a relation of authority and submission, a relation in which the persons are considered as if distinct centers of consciousness.¹⁴

Not only has its content mutated, the place that the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son now occupies in the theologies of its advocates is also largely a new development. The doctrine has become a particularly load-bearing one, with the result that a poorly formed understanding of the Trinity has become the cause of considerable mischief. Whereas someone like Strong might have referenced relations between the sexes in the context of his doctrine of the Trinity to prove a point about the possibility of order without inequality, modern defenders of the doctrine are

¹³ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 342.

¹⁴ It is my suspicion that no small part of the problem here—a problem that also afflicts understandings of relations between the sexes—lies in the flattening out of the subtle order of historic treatments of divine *taxis* into something more like a chain of command ordered into terms of ranked degrees of authority. Grudem and others press the ordinal designations of the persons of the Trinity (first, second, third person) into the service of a hierarchical ranking, downplaying the designations of Triune relations in terms of “qualitative” processions (begotten or spirated) in favour of claims about relative degrees of authority.

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